

Boundless

The Newsletter for
Refugees Welcome,
Cheshire East
April 2022

Support Refugee families in Cheshire East

Welcome to the spring edition of Boundless, the newsletter for
Refugees Welcome, Cheshire East.

A QUICK UPDATE

Since our first edition of Boundless the world has changed dramatically. We are now in the midst of the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since 1945. The response to the crisis in the Ukraine by the British public in general and our local area in particular has been overwhelming. In Cheshire East we are preparing to receive large numbers of Ukrainian refugees, mainly women and children, through the government's Homes for Ukraine Scheme. The logistics of this process are still being worked out at the time of writing but the model of support we want to run is to have small teams of experienced trustees and volunteers in each town, who will be able to lead bigger teams of less experienced volunteers. Current information as well as details about how you can help can be found on [the Cheshire East website](#). You can also register on the government website [here](#).

Meanwhile there are still large numbers of Afghan families in bridging hotels waiting for suitable accommodation and many who are still finding their feet in their new communities while coping with the anxiety of family and friends still in danger in Afghanistan. On a happier note we are preparing to celebrate five years since the arrival of the first five Syrian families, now our friends and neighbours, and reflect on how far they have come in that time and what they have given all of us who have spent time with them.

In this edition of Boundless, read about the experiences and memories of Syrians in Cheshire, news from two Afghan family recently settled in the UK, a few thoughts on politics and refugees, an uplifting concert in Manchester and more....

Katherine Edwards, Editor

The village of Bollington has shown what can be achieved through harnessing the outpouring of sympathy and generosity which has followed the terrible events in Ukraine. Following a [Facebook post](#) by Neil Crozier, [Bollington Ukraine Support Group](#) was set up and has now become affiliated to Refugees Welcome. *In less than a week* it received pledges for an astonishing £18 K, obtained a first house and recruited 12 key workers to help host families and a team of 3 who deal with furnishing and fittings. It was established by David Raines, a Cognitive Behaviour Therapist with experience of working in Syria and Libya for the World Health Organisation.



Registered Charity Number 1169909

Refugees Welcome aims to support, integrate and empower refugees in every possible way, from sourcing furniture and equipment, to helping with access to medical care and education, interpreting and English learning. We acknowledge the huge contribution which newcomers - including displaced people - have always made to our society. We are committed to helping newly arrived people fulfil their potential as independent members of the community, enriching it with their skills, culture and unique perspective.

New Northerners: Syrian families in Cheshire five years on

It is now five years since Refugees Welcome was set up in response to the war in Syria. Five families have settled in Cheshire East as part of the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme and Refugees Welcome has played an important role helping them set up new lives here.

So what did they first make of this place and how are they finding life now? We discussed this as a group in an English lesson and then as individual families with the volunteers. There was a lot of agreement about first impressions. By far the biggest positive was understandably the sense of safety and freedom, closely followed by the relief of having good schools for their children who had had several years with no education in the camp in Lebanon. Very favourable comparisons were made with the harsh discipline in Syrian schools. They agreed that the people they have met have been friendly but that the circumstances of the COVID 19 pandemic have been isolating. Apart from the terrible sadness of family members left behind, there was only really one negative: the weather! It struck me that although we might be inclined to smile at this, the cold, the rain and the wind seems to shadow over so many newcomers' memories of arrival in Britain, not least the Windrush generation, that it might actually be a more significant factor in their wellbeing than we realise. Once they found out where to buy their usual ingredients, food hasn't been a problem for them. They all agreed that they miss Syrian weddings and with large families and huge guest lists, weddings in Syria are a regular, colourful and exuberant feature of life, featuring a lot of music, dancing and food.

Hearing their stories about life in Syria before their country was torn apart by war is very interesting and brings it home what huge adjustments they have had to make to life in a very different culture. Kamal and Amar live in Congleton with their four children. They told their story to Paul, a Refugees Welcome volunteer who has taught them English and become a good friend.

"I started work aged 11 because my family needed the money."

"My name is Kamal. I started work aged 11 because my family needed the money and I was the oldest child. I worked with my uncle, who was a bus

driver for 7 years, helping him sell tickets and carry people's bags. My uncle didn't pay me very well! At 19 I took my driving test and began to drive a different bus - the money was better! My bus carried 24 people (sitting down, not standing as in previous times) from Idlib to Damascus and back every day - 240 miles with one break. The people tended to be friendly but there were occasional fights! The two Eid festivals were particularly difficult with so many people wanting to travel - I worked continual shifts, often at antisocial hours."



Motaab and Noura with three of their children



Kamal, Amar and Paul with a cake Kamal and Amar made for the English class

Motaab and Noura live in Macclesfield with their four children. A long term volunteer at the Hope Centre, Noura now works in a café. They remembered: "When we came here the first time everything was new for us and it was very hard because we didn't understand English. We saw nice people and it was a nice town so we were feeling safe.... We have very good neighbours and volunteers helping us. It was good that the children were in a nice school. Unlike Lebanon, it was easier to get health services and the doctors were very kind. We found the people working on the

buses, taxis and trains very nice and friendly. People were helpful and smiled at you. Now we like having coffee near the Town Hall and working at the Hope Centre. Sometimes we go shopping in Manchester for Halal food but it is very busy so we prefer Macclesfield for clothes and food. Sometimes you can get a good bargain in the Charity shops.” Motaab related a funny incident in the Co-op: “After we arrived here, I went to get some eggs from the Co-op. I couldn’t see them and didn’t know the word EGGS so I asked the man and made a chicken noise but the man gave me a chicken! At last he understood I wanted eggs. We laughed and became friends. After that, he helped me to learn the names of things in the shop.”

“We laughed and became friends.”

Their 14 year old son (right, with Noura) was 9 when he arrived. He related some of his first impressions to Mary, volunteer with the family.

“When I knew I was coming to Macclesfield I was very nervous because I didn’t know what it would be like. I remember being amazed at the buildings as they were so different to the ones in Lebanon, they were separate and modern. Also,



“you could see the sky because it wasn’t full of hundreds of electricity cables”

you could see the sky because it wasn’t full of hundreds of electricity cables. In Lebanon we lived in a flat and it was very dangerous. I hated it. There were lots of people with guns in the streets,

there were no police and a lot of people in the streets were taking drugs and smoking. I went to school but I didn’t understand English.

Soon after I arrived in Macclesfield, I went to school but nobody told me where I was going so I was very nervous again. All the children were very friendly and said ‘Hello’ to me. They took me to play football but I just watched because I don’t really like football. I liked learning a new language and just copied what the children said and I learned! I learned some swear words too but I didn’t know they were swear words and I said one to my teacher but he just said ‘Don’t use that word’. He wasn’t cross. I was proud that I learned to read and write English because I couldn’t read Arabic just speak it. I like living in Macclesfield: I like the fresh air, nature and all the trees. I want to go to College after school and then get a job so I can help my family have a good life.”

“I was proud that I learned to read and write in English”



Involvement with the Syrian families has also enriched the lives of our volunteers. Sally, for example, recalls how “It has been exciting to work with other volunteers, sharing their varied, and considerable skills and experience”. The first English lessons were a steep learning curve, involving “trying to fathom what we heard as *we went to disco* in

“As well as the family’s generosity, hospitality and dignity, this mutual muddle revealed their great sense of humour.”

answer to the question *what did you do at the weekend?* The family were, rightly as it turned out, convinced they were saying the correct words. We eventually realised they had gone to Tesco! As well as the family’s generosity, hospitality and dignity,

“Food, as always, was provided by the Syrian ladies who made it look beautiful.”

this mutual muddle revealed their great sense of humour.” She also remembers an afternoon event at the Clonter Opera. “This was to give a flavour of English country life, including falcons, food, and folk dancing. It was a heart-warming experience and the children took part in all the activities. Food, as always, was provided by the Syrian ladies who made it look beautiful.” Jemila, whose roles include Arabic translator with the families, recalled a perfect afternoon with the Syrian family she was working with, having a picnic in Alderley Edge, another example of the many happy memories which have been made over the past 5 years.

A postcard from the North East

Earlier this month we received a lovely message from Jalal Farhad, former senior interpreter with NATO and Coordinator of the Lincoln Learning Centre in Afghanistan. Jalal and his family moved from the bridging hotel in Cheshire to a permanent home in Gateshead, Newcastle-upon-Tyne last month. Although everyone who knew Jalal and his family were sad that they were sent so far from Cheshire, we are delighted to hear that they are happily settling in their new city. Jalal was full of praise and affection for the staff at the hotel, describing them as *an excellent symbol of welcoming and friendship by the British people* describing his stay there as an *exceptionally rewarding experience, with lovely accommodation and delicious food*. Similarly he was very warm in his praise for Cheshire East Council and the LOL Foundation. As for Newcastle, he described how he and his family *are enjoying life here with great cultural diversity, lovely people and the Geordie accent*. His children are now getting ready to start their new schools after the Easter holidays. We wish Jalal and his family all the very best in their new home and hope that they will come back to visit friends in Cheshire East.



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From Kabul to Macclesfield

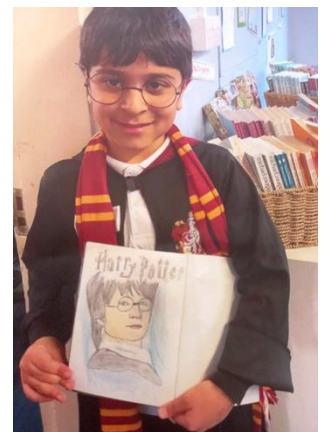
Waheed and his family fled the Taliban in August last year. He reflects here on his first few months in the UK. “Obviously the whole world was surprised when Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban in August 2021, and we as a family were no exception. We had not thought of changing our country that soon, but in a matter of days if not hours, we planned to leave our country and had to live in hiding during our stay after the fall of Kabul. However, due to my previous involvement with the international community in strengthening the governance and service delivery of the government agencies in Afghanistan, I had opportunities to relocate to the US, Portugal, and the UK. For many reasons, we chose the UK as the best option for relocation.

I have not seen even a glimpse of a discrimination against us, and I hope this will continue throughout our lifetime in this beautiful country.

Despite the huge differences between the lifestyle in Afghanistan and the UK, compared to some other refugees, I felt confident, as I personally had knowledge and experience of living in the western

countries before. This helps me and my family to adapt easily to UK culture. Meanwhile, I find the local society in Macclesfield and the country very welcoming. In my experience, despite all the differences in culture, religion, and other aspects, in most of the cases, being a law-abiding resident is the major requirement for being welcomed here. I have not seen even a glimpse of a discrimination against us, and I hope this will continue throughout our lifetime in this beautiful country.

Besides enjoying a peaceful life here, the good quality of services, especially education for our children has made us more hopeful for a better future. Initially, we were worried whether our children would be able to catch up at the host school. But the education system is so strong that my kids are very happy and recently the artwork of my son (see right) is hanging in the school to be seen and appreciated by other students and staff as one of the best artworks. We are looking forward to settling in the country successfully and being able to contribute actively to the development and welfare of the host society.”

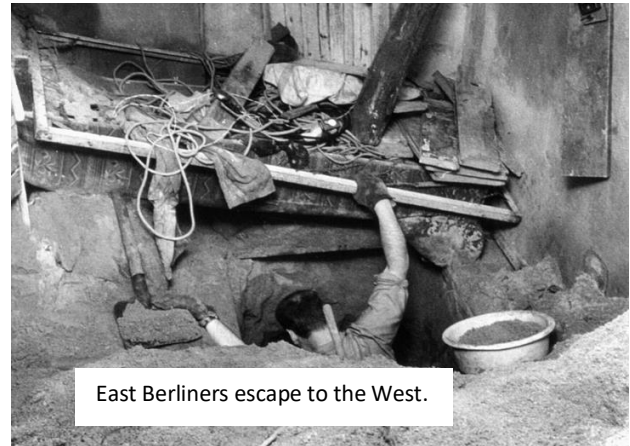


Refugees and the accidents of global politics



Sculpture in Berlin commemorating the escape of an East German soldier to West Berlin.

About 10 years ago I was in the Checkpoint Charlie Museum in Berlin with a group of GCSE History students, a museum dedicated to the experiences of those fleeing the communist East. We marvelled at their daring journeys in hot air balloons, in specially adapted car boots, through sewers or by swimming the cold waters of the River Spree. We celebrated the bravery, ingenuity and determination of those who staked everything on this desperate flight. We felt the horror of those escape attempts which ended in tragedy and the jubilation of those who made it despite the odds into the embrace of the 'free world'. The unspoken assumption was that the rest of their lives would be happy, safe and prosperous.



A few years passed and I was on another school trip. We stopped at a service station before the Eurostar. In the grey, early morning chill the neon fruit machines hurt our eyes as we disembarked to use the facilities. There were police about and a lorry was being searched – three officers guarding three figures, sitting huddled on the ground, their backs to the wall. I walked past awkwardly. One of the men was shaking uncontrollably. Another had his head in his hands. It was all very British in a sense – there may even have been cups of tea, there was certainly no police brutality and a medical professional was filling in some forms. But the despair of the men at the end of their journey was hard to forget, a journey which may well have lasted years, cost them everything they had, taken them across deserts, in and out of the hands of traffickers and through countless unimaginable dangers and had just ended with a torch shone into a lorry. Their stories are not likely to be celebrated in a museum any time soon. Instead they may still be negotiating the hostile environment of Home Office interviews, crumbling SERCO housing, endless suspicious questions, waiting and appeals. But like those who made it through the sewers of Berlin, these people have also fled fear, hopelessness and violence. They have risked everything to gamble on life delivering a better deal for them and their dependents. One group were heroes, the other at best a problem for the authorities and at worse... we all know the language used by certain sections of the British press.

If you are one of the 27 million displaced people in the world, the all-important question of whether you are seen as a hero or a nuisance is a pure accident of history, politics and circumstance. During the First World War Britain welcomed 250,000 Belgian refugees and – like with refugees from the Communist East during the Cold War - it suited the national agenda to turn them into heroes. To hold concerts in their honour and to publicise - and in some cases fabricate - the horrors they had been through at the hands of the Germans was good for recruitment. Now, in the midst of



Belgian refugees 1914

the worst refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War, it is so encouraging to see at least some government response to the huge wave of public sympathy for Ukrainians fleeing war. We also hope that it benefits those forced into a similar situation by the fall-out of less high profile wars in Yemen, Eritrea or Sudan or persecution in Iraq, Iran or China. Many are waiting in a stultifying, lonely bureaucratic limbo for the green light to resume their lives. They have all done what we too would do in their circumstances and with their desperation, courage, luck and tenacity.

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Review: Music, film and hope on a theme of boundlessness



Freedom to Roam is a music and film project led by flautist Eliza Marshall, which recently came to the Stoller Hall, Manchester, as part of its Spring Tour. It was a very poignant occasion, being the very day Putin launched his invasion of the Ukraine. The performers began by paying tribute to the Ukrainians resisting the invasion.

The group, including flutes, violin, cello, tabla, harp and percussion played the whole of their album *The Rhythms of Migration*. It was preceded by a film featuring rewilding projects, tree planting by Glasgow primary school pupils, the issue of public access to land and the connection between nature and mental health. This was an extraordinary performance, highlighting the connections between

issues of migration and displacement, the environmental crisis and our relationship to the natural world and in a powerfully positive, compassionate and inspiring way.

Elena, a music student in the audience, wrote:

“The album was accompanied by a slide show of images that blurred into one another, reflecting the immediate emotions of the music. I felt totally absorbed in both the colours of the music and the visual colours on the stage. There was an absence of boundaries in all aspects: the fluidity of musical genre, combining Celtic, African and Indian folk music; the connection between audience and performer; the visual and sound worlds; and the obvious bond between the musicians.”

Read more about the tour and the album, and watch a video clip [here](#).

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What do we currently need?

- Anyone who wishes to offer rooms or other accommodation to refugees from Ukraine, please register on the government website [here](#) as well as on [the Cheshire East website](#).
- laptops
- work placements – paid or voluntary - for those looking to find jobs
- drivers – to help with lifts
- and of course, financial donations 😊

Book Recommendation? 'The Bookseller of Kabul' by Åsne Seierstad

The reason for the question mark is that this is a fascinating but controversial book. Following the fall of the Taliban in 2002, Norwegian journalist Seierstad lived in disguise with a bookseller and his family in Kabul. She observed life for ordinary Afghans and describes their everyday experiences subjectively but vividly and with nuance and empathy. Her account was subsequently challenged by some of the people it describes and Seierstad was found guilty of defamation but was cleared on appeal. Bearing these ethical questions in mind, it is a window on some of the complexities of Afghan life and the cultural differences between Britain and Afghanistan, especially on the issue of gender.

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And again, a heartfelt message of thanks to everyone!

You can support our work by setting up a standing order for a regular monthly donation - £5/10/20 or whatever you would like to give (see next page).

This will go directly towards:

- Vital equipment for families - eg. pushchairs, cots, phones
- Providing Welcome Hampers for newly arrived families
- Insurance for volunteers working with families
- Professional help to select, train and oversee volunteers
- Room hire and some other expenses for English lessons
- One-off needs (For example, during lockdown we had the funding to give every refugee family access to a laptop to communicate with volunteers and to continue their children's education online.)

Your payment should be made to:

ACCOUNT NAME: Refugees Welcome Community Account
SORT CODE: 01-05-41
ACCOUNT NUMBER: 45946426
REFERENCE: BOUNDLESS
Please make sure that your name is clearly written on your BACS payment.

Go to www.refugeeswelcome.co.uk for more details or email refugeescheshireeast@gmail.com

Please send donations / standing order mandates to:

Alan Brown (Treasurer), Refugees Welcome, 13 Lea Drive, NANTWICH CW5 5JS

Refugees Welcome, c/o Macclesfield Methodist Church, Westminster Road, Macclesfield, SK10 1BX



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Instructions to your Bank Manager

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Please pay to Refugees Welcome

Sort Code 01 05 41 Account Number 45946426

The sum of £ (in figures) (in words)
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Until further notice and debit my account accordingly.

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I am a UK taxpayer and understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax in the current tax year than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations it is my responsibility to pay any difference.

Gift Aid is reclaimed by the charity from the tax you pay for the current tax year. Your address is needed to identify you as a current UK taxpayer.

Please notify Refugees Welcome if you:

- want to cancel this declaration
- change your name or home address
- no longer pay sufficient tax on your income and/or capital gains

If you pay Income Tax at the higher or additional rate and want to receive the additional tax relief due to you, you must include all your Gift Aid donations on your Self-Assessment tax return or ask HM Revenue and Customs to adjust your tax code.